

Transcribing the Past for the Future: Reimagining South Australia's 1894 Women's Suffrage Petition to Parliament as an Interactive Public Resource.

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Parliament of South Australia

Introduction

In 1894, a petition of over 10,000 signatures was presented to the Parliament of South Australia by members of the Women's Suffrage League, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, and the Working Women's Trade Union. Atop each of the 191 pages of the petition was the following statement:

To the Honorable the Speaker and the Members of the House of Assembly of South Australia, of Parliament assembled:

The Petition by the undersigned Adult Residents in the Province of South Australia, humbly sheweth:-

- I. That your petitioners are convinced of the absolute justice of giving Women the Franchise for both House of Parliament, on the same terms as it is now, or may hereafter be granted to men.*
- II. They therefore respectfully pray that the necessary Legislation may be passed by your Honorable House with the least possible delay.*

And your Petitioners as in duty bound will every pray, &c.

The petition was introduced in August of that year by Mr Hawker, the Member for North Adelaide, supporting legislation that would allow women to vote, as well as stand for election, in the colony of South Australia. South Australia was the second self-governing colony in the British Empire, after New Zealand in 1891, to grant women the vote, with the petition demonstrating that there was significant popular enthusiasm for extending suffrage. Based on the figures of the 1891 South Australian census, an estimated seven to eight per cent of the adult population of the colony signed the petition.

Since the centenary of extending the franchise to women in 1994, there has been a keen interest in South Australia in celebrating this milestone in the history of women's suffrage, including efforts by the State Records of South Australia (SRSA) to first microfilm then transcribe the petition. The 125th anniversary in 2019 saw the History Trust of South Australia (HTSA) and the Centre of Democracy (COD) create the first searchable database, based on the 1994 transcription, and an accompanying spatial distribution map. However, the transcription from the 1990s had left hundreds of illegible entries and the microfilm was not readily accessible, which meant that the public version of the petition did not provide the full picture of those who had signed it.

Beginning in 2024, the House of Assembly commenced a new public engagement project. Recognising the importance of the 1894 petition, the House wanted to produce a tangible resource that members of the public could access and see the individuals who had been signatories of the petition. In viewing the thousands of signatures collected by the petitioners, it allows the public to gain a greater understanding of the broad participation in the suffrage movement in colonial South Australia and the history of democracy in our state.

This paper explores how this was achieved, outlining the processes undertaken by the House of Assembly project team to develop a user-friendly and complete database of the petition's signatories, while maintaining historical accuracy. This paper explores how this was achieved, outlining the processes undertaken by the House of Assembly project team to develop a user-friendly and complete database of the petition's signatories, while maintaining historical accuracy. It highlights the work conducted to uncover the hundreds of illegible entries in the previous database transcription and the efforts to marry this with high quality scans of the original petition, allowing the public to better engage with this historical document from anywhere around the world.

Historical context

Within the Westminster system petitions have long been used to give voice to people appealing directly to parliament. Focusing on petitioning in British political history, Richard Huzzey and Henry Miller argue that petitions are 'a crucial site of representation between people and parliament' and provide an insight into the development of popular participation and representation, which has been traditionally overlooked by historians focused on elections and electoral culture.¹ Petitions, they claim, 'enabled regular interaction between people and parliamentarians outside the often long lags between elections'. Furthermore, practices associated with petitions, such as their drafting, signing and presentation 'enabled a vibrant public politics', especially in a time of limited political suffrage.²

Miranda Johnson and Henry Miller remind us that petitions to parliament were not just employed in the British Isles, but also practiced across the British Empire, and later the Commonwealth.³ This includes Australia, with Jennifer Gallagher observing, '[f]rom the earliest days of British settlement in Australia, petitions have been used by the public to voice their opinion on the issues and events that concerned them at the time.'⁴ Gallagher notes that still today, petitions in Australia 'offer a voice for demographics rarely heard or recorded in history such as women, the poor,

¹ Richard Huzzey & Henry Miller, 'Petitions, Parliament and Political Culture: Petitioning the House of Commons, 1780-1918', *Past and Present*, 248 (August 2020) p. 124.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 124-126.

³ Miranda Johnson & Henry Miller, 'Introduction: Petitions and Petitioning in Colonial and Post-Colonial Contexts', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 53/3 (2025) pp. 453-475.

⁴ Jennifer Gallagher, 'Petitions: A Voice for Sharing Our Social History', *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, 37/2 (2022) p. 126.

migrants or those with limited education'.⁵ However, as Niamh Corbett writes, they remain an underused historical resource by Australian scholars.⁶

The scholarship that does exist on petitioning in Australia has heavily focused on struggles for suffrage and franchise, namely the history of Indigenous political activism as well as women's suffrage in the Australian colonies in the 1890s. Analysing First Nations' petitions from the 1840s to the 1980s, Trish Luker states that 'First Nations petitions have most often been examined as valuable historical examples of Indigenous engagement with textual and literary modalities and as rare sources of Indigenous perspectives on the conditions of invasion and colonisation'.⁷ Concerning the petitions for women's suffrage in the Australian colonies, Deborah Jordan writes that 'a historical reading of their petitions makes the groundswell of settler women visible', as they provided 'an empirical basis around which emerging women leaders could publicly [sic] challenge opponents'.⁸

Women's suffrage petition in South Australia

Women's suffrage is an important historical milestone both for South Australia and the nation. In 1894 South Australia granted women the right to vote, making it not just the first jurisdiction in Australia to do so but one of the first in the world. South Australia had been preceded only by New Zealand which, one year earlier had become the first self-governing country to grant adult women, including Māori women, the right to vote on the back of a petition with 23,000 signatures. However, it was not until 1919 that women in New Zealand could run for a seat in Parliament. Not many years later, Australia became the first place in the world to grant women the dual rights to vote and run at federal level with the *Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902*. This law granted people the right to vote in federal elections regardless of gender, marital status or property ownership. Shamefully however, the Act restricted this right to exclude Aboriginal people, Torres Strait Islanders, Pacific Islanders, and people from Africa and Asia. In South Australia, the women's suffrage bill included the right of First Nations women to vote, sadly this was overridden by the 1902 Act.

In South Australia, it took several attempts to introduce women's suffrage in parliament. The first attempt was in the form of a *Constitution Amendment Bill* introduced by Dr Edward Stirling in the House of Assembly on 16 June 1886. This Bill, which would have granted voting rights to widows and single women who owned property but not married women, failed to obtain an absolute majority of the House and was not passed.⁹ In the years that followed, the movement gained momentum, in part driven by strong advocates such as Mary Lee and Catherine Helen Spence.

⁵ Gallagher, 'Petitions', p. 127.

⁶ Niamh Corbett, 'Parliamentary Petitions: An Untapped Library Resource', *Australian Library Journal*, 60/3 (2011) pp. 218-230.

⁷ Trish Luker, 'Sovereign Signatures: Australian First Nations Petitions', in Karen Crawley, Thomas Giddens & Timothy D. Peters (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Legal Studies* (London: Routledge, 2024) p. 336.

⁸ Deborah Jordan, 'The Role of Petitions in the Mobilization of Women for the Right to Vote: The Case of Queensland, Australia, 1894, 1897', *Journal of Women's History*, 29/3 (2017) p. 103, p. 101.

⁹ Parliament of South Australia, *Women's Suffrage in South Australia*, <https://suffrage.parliament.sa.gov.au/timeline/>, accessed 22 May, 2026.

In this period, major suffrage groups and campaigners in South Australia started a petition in favour of women's suffrage, on the back of which John Hannah Gordon introduced into the Legislative Council the *Constitutional Amendment (Adult Suffrage) Bill* for women's voting rights in July 1894. The following month, on 16 August 1894, the Bill was amended to include the right to stand for Parliament, passed 17 to 4 in the Legislative Council. The following week, on 23 August 1894, the petition in favour of women's suffrage was tabled in the House of Assembly. The petition, made up of hundreds of lengths of paper glued end-to-end and tied up with a yellow ribbon, contained 10,656 signatures and was over 100 metres long.¹⁰ When the Bill was introduced in the House of Assembly, it prompted several petitions *against* women's suffrage. The largest one had just over 2,000 signatures and the smallest one had only 42. None were significant enough to disturb the momentum of the movement. On 18 December 1894, the Bill in favour of women's suffrage was finally passed by both Houses.

The original women's suffrage petition for South Australia is now stored within the South Australian Parliament, housed in custom-made boxes for optimal preservation. The petition is often requested by galleries, museums, and interested members of the public to view or host as an exhibition. However, lending the petition out is difficult because the original pages are delicate, cannot be exposed to much light, and handling individual pages can result in substantial damage, so limited movement is best for its long-term preservation.

The women's suffrage petition continues to be of great public interest. In 1994, to mark the centenary of women's suffrage, the State Records of South Australia (SRSA) copied the petition onto microfilm and enlisted a team of staff and volunteers to transcribe the petition. The final product was compiled as an index of names in alphabetical order by signatory, contained as a PDF document. Presenting it this way allowed for the names to be in alphabetical order (for searchability) but, problematically for our digitisation project, not in order of the petition page numbers.

To mark the 125th anniversary of women's suffrage, the History Trust of South Australia (the History Trust), hosted by the Centre of Democracy (COD), built a database using the SRSA petition. This database allowed people to search by name or location, using the 1994 transcription. However, the COD webpage notes:

*Due to the age and size of the petition some names were illegible and unable to be transcribed accurately... Others are absent from the transcription, leaving a discrepancy of some 1300 records.*¹¹

For the last two decades, the 1994 index, with its many flaws, has stood as the master document and the best option for sharing the petition. Our project, as detailed in the sections below, builds upon the excellent work done by the tireless volunteers, converting the digital petition into a live, searchable tool that is easily available online. We hope this work will foster greater public engagement, allow for an increased sense of community ownership, and provide opportunities

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Centre of Democracy, *Search the Women's Suffrage Petition (1894)*, <https://www.centreofdemocracy.sa.gov.au/suffrage-petition/>, accessed 19 August, 2026.

for community participation in suggesting corrections – perhaps even adding detail to the 10,656 lives of those who signed.

Beginning in 2024, a new and substantial project to preserve and digitise the petition was undertaken by Artlab Australia. This saw the petition rehoused in archival boxes under optimal conditions, with individual sheets of the petition placed in their own protective casings, which allowed for better preservation. As part of this process, extremely high-resolution images of the original petition were captured for digitisation, improving greatly on the microfilm version from 1994.

The 1994 version of the database corresponded to microfilm scans of the original paper. Due to size restrictions of the microfilm technology, the page numbers of the original petition do not align with the page numbers of the microfilm. The new 2020s scan allowed for matching with the original pages of the petition, rendering the old database outdated, with many signatures now on completely different page numbers. All 10,656 signatures needed to be repaginated to facilitate searching.

There was discussion about how to optimise this work for the benefit of the South Australian public. The Clerk's office wanted to display the pages by producing a replica online, with the scans being searchable. The Education Office expanded on this idea proposing an interactive digital kiosk inside Parliament House for visitors. To make the newly digitised scans searchable, parliamentary staff had to create a database from which the programmers could link every signature on the petition to the correctly scanned page.

In writing about how to best achieve engagement between citizens and parliament, Christina Lesto-Badeira, Didier Caluwaerts and Daan Vermassen argue that public engagement 'should involve a dialogical relationship rather than a one-way flow of information and be outcome-led rather than activity focused ... [in that] it should linger beyond the occurrence of these and have an effect on the citizen'.¹² They discuss five core principles of engagement: inclusivity, relevance, relatability, continuity, and sustainability.¹³ Nestled among these, our project speaks particularly to the principle of relatability: it is a project 'based on connections' and the associated 'stories, issues and people' of South Australia, which is especially pertinent for the many living relatives of signatories today. The petition itself represents a historical social movement and a process of parliament that produced a lasting outcome. Our searchable database adds another dimension in that it allows for an engagement initiative and resource 'that citizens can more easily relate to'¹⁴ through their own family connections or historical interests. By creating a publicly accessible

¹² Christina Lesto-Badeira, Didier Caluwaerts & Daan Vermassen, 'Reimagining Engagement between Citizens and Parliament', in David Judge and Cristina Leston-Bandeira (eds), *Reimagining Parliament*, (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2024) p. 67.

¹³ In 2025, the International Parliament Engagement Network (IPEN) released a list of eight engagement principles: purpose, inclusion, openness and transparency, collaboration and empowerment, ethical standards, planning and resourcing, integration and coordination, and impact and evaluation. See International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, IPEN, *Principles of Parliamentary Public Engagement*, 2025, <https://ipen-network.org/public-engagement-guides/>; accessed 7 August, 2026.

¹⁴ Lesto-Badeira, Caluwaerts & Vermassen, 'Reimagining Engagement between Citizens and Parliament', p. 75.

resource based on preserving the history and personal stories of South Australians, this digitisation and transcription project can achieve that lasting result. Moreover, public engagement projects, like this one, have the potential to support the ongoing value of petitions to parliament more generally. As Catherine Bochel suggests, more public education and awareness about the usefulness of petitions to address social policy issues has the potential to increase the diversity of petitioners and the range of outcomes.¹⁵

Similar projects in Australasia

The South Australian petition was part of a movement across Australasia in the late 19th century for women's suffrage, with petitions being put forward in several colonies. In Victoria, over 30,000 people signed the aptly named 'Monster Petition' of 1891, while more than 23,000 people signed the 1893 petition in New Zealand.¹⁶ In 1894 two petitions in favour of women's suffrage were put forward in Queensland, one predominantly signed by the women and the other by men, gathering 7,859 and 3,597 signatures respectively.¹⁷ This was followed by another petition in 1897, which garnered nearly 4,000 signatures.¹⁸

Similar digitisation projects have been undertaken for women's suffrage petitions in Australia and New Zealand. The New Zealand petition was digitised by Archives NZ and is hosted on their website. Archives NZ also encourages members of the public to assist in the development of biographies for the signatories of the petition.

In 1993, Archives NZ created a card index for the signatories of the petition which 'cross-reference[d] individual signatories with the original microform page on which the petition was reproduced' and the petition was digitised in 2016.¹⁹ Prior to this, the petition was 'transcribed by a team overseen by Archives New Zealand staff, and was reproduced in both microform and hard-copy', with the microform copy providing 'an exact replica of the origins' and the paper version supplying the names in sheet number order or alphabetical order.²⁰ According to Stefanie Lash, a senior archivist at Archives NZ, 'the list of people who signed the Petition and their locations was well-described' and in the digital version, 'the images of the signatures on the Petition were easy to access in very high resolution'.²¹

Similar processes were undertaken in Victoria and Queensland, with both parliaments having created searchable databases of their suffrage petitions that are available on their websites.

¹⁵ Catherine Bochel, 'Petitions: Different Dimensions of Voice and Influence in the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales', *Social Policy & Administration*, 46/2 (2012) pp. 142-160.

¹⁶ Brienne Callahan, 'The "Monster Petition" and the Women of Davos Street', *Provenance: Journal of the Public Record Office Victoria*, 7 (2008) pp. 96-104; Maggie Blackburn, 'Behind the Names: Mapping Suffrage Activism and the Impact of the Women's Vote in Napier, 1892-1896', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 56/2 (2022) pp. 68-91.

¹⁷ Jordan, 'The Role of Petitions in the Mobilization of Women for the Right to Vote', p. 85.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Stefanie Lash, 'The 1893 Women's Suffrage Petition Biography Project: A Report from the Field', *New Zealand Journal of Public History*, 6 (2018) p. 24.

²⁰ Kirsten Thomlinson, 'We The Undersigned: An Analysis of Signatories to the 1893 Women's Suffrage Petition from Southern Dunedin', unpublished MA thesis, University of Otago, 2001, p. 25.

²¹ Lash, 'The 1893 Women's Suffrage Petition Biography Project', p. 24

Victoria's 'Monster Petition' of 1891 was digitised in 2004, with 'the Public Record Office Victoria, Parliament of Victoria, League of Women Voters, the Genealogical Society of Victoria, and the Royal Historical Society of Victoria combin[ing] in a project to transcribe the names of the petition into a searchable database'.²²

In Queensland, the three previously mentioned petitions combined collected nearly 15,500 signatures in favour of women's suffrage. Unlike other states, the Queensland petitions had not been preserved or transcribed in the same manner and were unable to be located in the preparations for the state's centenary of women's suffrage. The petitions were eventually discovered by parliamentary librarian John McCulloch.²³ The Queensland Parliament, in conjunction with the State Archives, photographed the original petitions. Similar to South Australia, the transcription process was then primarily undertaken by a small group of volunteers from the Queensland Family History Society.²⁴ According to the Society's Rosemary Kopittke, the volunteers spent 500 hours transcribing 378 photographs of petitions, using techniques they had learnt from indexing other historical records. As an *ABC News* article reported:

*In their bid to decipher as many of the petitioners as possible, the group trawled through electoral rolls, birth, deaths and marriage registers and post office directories from the time for clues to the identity of those who had penned their name in support of women's rights.*²⁵

James Keating wrote that the 'digitisation of women's franchise petitions... has enriched our understanding of the suffragists' spatial organisation and local mobilisation strategies'.²⁶ There have been a number of studies of the New Zealand, Victorian and Queensland petition signatories, exploring who signed the petition and their life histories, as well as analyses by geography, political affiliation and class. In a similar vein, to aid spatial analysis, the History Trust and the COD used the 1994 information to create a Google Maps visualisation of the signatories.²⁷

Process

As with petition transcription projects in other jurisdictions mentioned above, and the earlier transcription project in South Australia in 1994, this project required an immense team effort. In doing so, we sought to honour the original petitioners and the 1994 volunteers who helped transcribe the petition for the SRSA database, in producing an updated and improved resource that is still as true to the original petition as possible. We undertook a detailed process of checking

²² Liz Rushen, 'Margaret McLean and the Monster Petition', *Circa: The Journal of Professional Historians*, 1 (2010) p. 48.

²³ Felicity Sheppard & Jennifer King, 'Suffrage Petitions Enter the Digital Age Thanks to Queensland Volunteers', *ABC News*, 17 September, 2014, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-17/suffrage-petitions-enter-the-digital-age/5741804>, accessed 19 August, 2026.

²⁴ Debroah Jordan, 'Queensland Women's Franchise Petitions of 1894 and 1897', *UQ Library Bulletin* (August 2014) p. 10.

²⁵ Sheppard & King, 'Suffrage Petitions Enter the Digital Age Thanks to Queensland Volunteers'.

²⁶ James Keating, 'Beginning a New Century of Women's Suffrage History?', *Agora*, 59/3 (2024) p. 37.

²⁷ Centre of Democracy, *Suffrage Petition Visualization*, <https://www.centreofdemocracy.sa.gov.au/suffrage-petition-visualization/> accessed 6 August, 2026.

every individual entry on all the newly scanned pages – every signature, place, occupation, honourific, signature position, duplication, error – to either come to consensus (i.e. make a formal change) or as close to (i.e. make an insertion with square brackets). This process involved routinely conferring with each other concerning accuracy to the original record and about how to guide and record the changes we were making. Our transcription work was supportive, collaborative, and enjoyable. In describing her own experiences with transcribing and translating archival texts, American historian Rebecca Scott writes that it is “collaboration, the talking and writing together that makes the study of the past into a social activity.”²⁸ We found this to be true of our transcription process.

To begin with, the SRSA provided us with a spreadsheet of the 1994 database, inclusive of entries with misspelled names, missing fields, or assumptions made (e.g. suburbs assumed, genders assumed). However, it was a tremendous resource for us to build on. As we discovered, deciphering 19th century faded penned cursive can be difficult, made no easier by the deteriorating vellum, archaic spellings, and a myriad of other challenges as we will discuss. We were told by the SRSA that, over the years, information had been added to their database. This information was provided by family or community members about identifying full names of people who had signed with initials or an abbreviated form of their name, or other details such as occupation. These additions were inserted using square brackets and aided with searching the 1994 database. We kept these additions and continued using square brackets in the same manner to best maintain veracity to the original text.

Updating, correcting, and proofing 10,656 entries was a huge task. The project started with one person but quickly grew to a team of five. In October 2025 Education Manager Natalie Badcock started paginating the signatures all on her own. Despite having done nearly half of the signatures on her own, it was becoming apparent that time and resource restraints necessitated a larger team. In mid-December 2025 four staff from the House of Assembly Committees office joined the project, with the last signature paginated at the end of January 2026.

During her time working alone on the project, Natalie devised a system and created an excel spread sheet to track her progress and record the process. Upon joining the project, this system was communicated to the additional four staff members. Working as a team, we refined the system throughout the entirety of the project.

The main documents used were the excel spreadsheet as the master version of the signatories, along with the new 191 scanned pages of the original petition, as provided by Artlab. We went through the original SRSA database record and updated the page numbers to align with the new scanned pages. In the excel spreadsheet, each signature was allocated a position number on the page based on the order it appeared in the petition, as shown in Figures 1 and 2. A single scanned page could have as many as 80 signatures or as few as 17.

²⁸ Rebecca J. Scott, ‘Transcription, Translation, and Collaboration’, *The Americas*, 97/3 (2002) p. 393.

Figure 1: Excerpt of collaborative petition excel spreadsheet, first page

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
1										State Records Database Page	New Page Number - Corresponding to Scanned File Name
2	Signature	Position on page	Surname	Honorific	Givenname	Building/House	Street	Town	Occupation		
2	1	1	HOLT		Jessie		Hurtle Square				1 002
3	2	2	WATSON		Isabel L.		Hurtle Square				1 002
4	3	3	GLALER [SLATER]		W.		Hurtle Square				1 002
5	4	4	CONNOR		Sarah		Gouger Street				1 002
6	5	5	CLARK		Emily		Gouger Street				1 002
7	6	6	COLE		Rose		Gouger Street				1 002
8	7	7	DALRYMPLE		Alice		Wright Street				1 002
9	8	8	AIKMAN		Ellen						1 002
10	9	9	HAILES		Agnes		King William Street South				1 002
11	10	10	FIELD		Sarah		Hurtle Square West				1 002

Figure 2: Excerpt of collaborative petition excel spreadsheet, final page

10636	10635	46	OSBORNE	Mrs				Millicent		156 191
10637	10636	47	OVERHEU	Mrs				Millicent		156 191
10638	10637	48	SERLE		Lydia			Honey Suckle Ford		156 191
10639	10638	49	WILLIAMS		M.			Millicent		156 191
10640	10639	50	WILLIAMS		M.			Millicent		156 191
10641	10640	51	WILLIAMS		W.J.			Millicent		156 191
10642	10641	52	MOTT		L.R.			Millicent		156 191
10643	10642	53	WALL		[Illegible]			Millicent		156 191
10644	10643	54	BROOKS		B.			Millicent		156 191

While reviewing the signature position numbers, we checked each name, place, and occupation, to ensure they were correct and true to the original vellum. As we progressed, any misspellings or queries were flagged in a separate column in the spreadsheet. All flagged queries were then assessed individually by all five of us with our responses recorded in another column under our names. We met periodically in person and online in a group chat (Microsoft Teams) to discuss the different responses. In deciding upon a queried name, if we reached unanimous agreement, then the change was made. In cases with a lack of consensus and legitimate but different options offered, then we conducted further checks via other sources. Such sources included historical maps for locations, Genealogy SA, Trove, cemetery records, and other web pages that could offer commentary on South Australia's historical events and changes.

Issues, challenges, and achievements

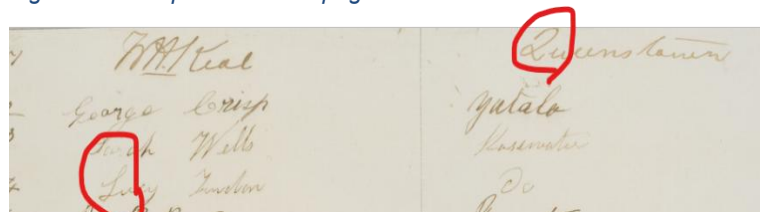
Illegible entries - mistranscriptions made by the SRSA

The History Trust and the COD stated that the 1994 transcription derived from the microfilmed version of the petition had around 1,300 illegible entries. As we went through the document, we also found that there were often entries, particularly names, that had been mistranscribed by SRSA. The high resolution of the newly digitised images allowed us to zoom in and adjust contrast to better determine what had been written. There were several instances where the ink appeared very faded, but adjusting the digital image could make the writing more legible and able to be cross-referenced.

We also learnt quickly about how certain letters were commonly written in the late nineteenth century, such as 'f', 'a' and 'h' or 'l', 'j' and 'q', which were often mistakenly mixed up in the 1994 transcription, especially if capitalised (e.g. Figure 3 shows how L and Q can look similar, and Figure 4 shows variations of A, J, H, and B). The letters 'n', 'r', 'a', 'i' and 'u' in cursive were also hard to decipher, particularly when running together in an entry.

Figure 3: Excerpt of scanned page 152

Figure 4: Excerpt of scanned page 172



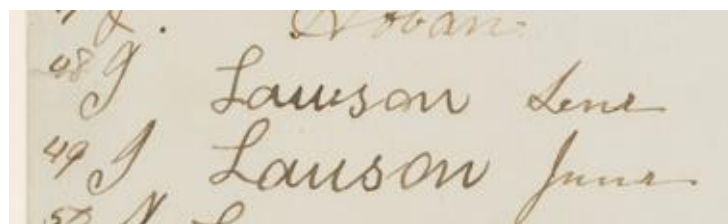
After familiarising ourselves with the writing styles, we were more adept to correct previous entries listed as 'illegible'. This allowed us to bring the original 1,300 illegible names down to roughly 100 in the final version. This is a notable achievement and significantly improved the accuracy of the resource.

Abbreviations

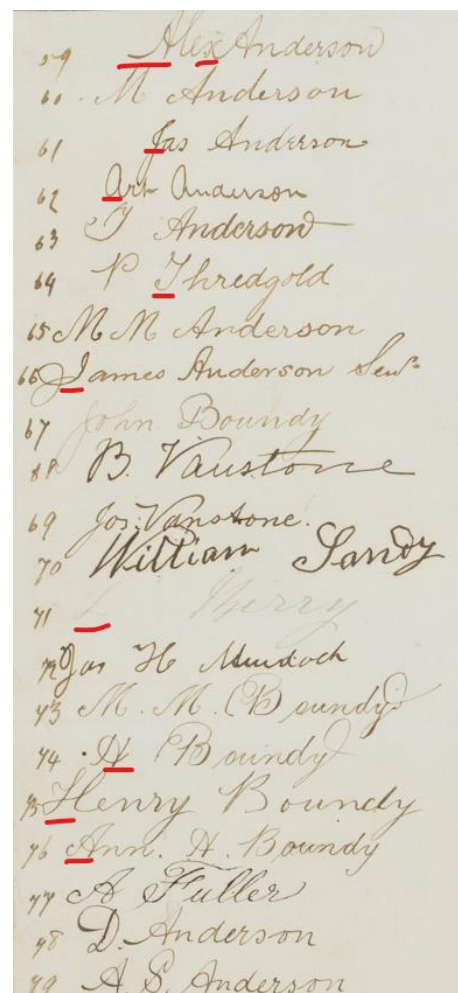
There were several archaic abbreviations used in the petition that needed to be interpreted, such as 'Jno' for John, 'Hld' for Harold, 'Wm' for William, 'Thos' for Thomas, and 'Margt' for Margaret. There were also some instances where the use of 'Jnr' and 'Snr' had, due to legibility, been incorrectly transcribed as names. This included one example where 'Jnr' and 'Snr' at first looked like 'June' and 'Lena', but after re-examination, we determined that the signatories were most probably father and son (Figure 5).

Part of these later determinations were only possible after a level of familiarity with the texts honed from months pouring over the files.

Figure 5: Excerpt of scanned page 28



Suburb/town queries - historical locations



The spatial distribution of the South Australian population was quite different in the 1890s to today, as were the place names within the state. We developed knowledge of these differences, often using a register of historical suburbs and towns that no longer existed. Some suburbs listed in the petition, such as West Thebarton or Woodville Park, were subsumed by other suburbs. Furthermore, a number of places with large numbers of German settlers had changed their name during the First World War due to anti-German sentiment. For example, hundreds of signatories were from Petersburg, which changed its name to Peterborough during the war. While some places changed back to their Germanic origins after 1918, some retained the new moniker. In the online database, this is reflected by including the contemporary name in square brackets. For example: 'Petersburg [Peterborough]', as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Town names from online database

Surname	Honorifics	Given Name	Street	Town	Occupation	Page
NOBLETT		Joseph		Petersburg [Peterborough]		18
TEMPLER		H.		Petersburg [Peterborough]		128
FITZGERALD		E.		Petersburg [Peterborough]		128

Source: *Women's Suffrage in South Australia*, 2026, Parliament of South Australia, accessed 12 August 2026; <https://suffrage.parliament.sa.gov.au/search-the-petition/>

Other locations listed on the original vellum were more difficult to decipher as they referred to a landmark or a non-traditional naming practice. For example, some signatories listed their place of residence merely as 'M.P.W.'. As a team, we considered that this may be a reference to Mutooroo Pastoral Company Wells on the Yorke Peninsula, but we were unable to reach consensus on this. Another example is one signatory recorded in the 1994 transcription as hailing from 'Tidnacordinimma' (Figure 7). We pondered whether it was related to the Mid North town of Coonamia, noting that this place name was based on a local Aboriginal Nukunu/Ngadjuri word, alongside the word 'Tidna' (Kurna for foot), which was used in several places in South Australia, usually signifying a place linked with walking. Eventually a search of place names that included the word 'Tidna' revealed the actual location, Tidnacordaninna, a waterhole on the Birdsville Track.

Figure 7: Town names from scanned page 137



We also discovered circumstances where we believed the volunteers for the 1994 transcription made assumptions and recorded suburbs or towns in the database in cases where particular streets were listed but a suburb or town was not. This was most common for streets in what is now the city centre, with 'Adelaide' added to many entries. While likely to be the case, a question arose as to whether this was faithful to the historical record. As the purpose of our project was to make a searchable database, it was felt that in many instances, we could add '[Adelaide]' or

similar in square brackets to assist the searching process while maintaining fidelity to the historical record.

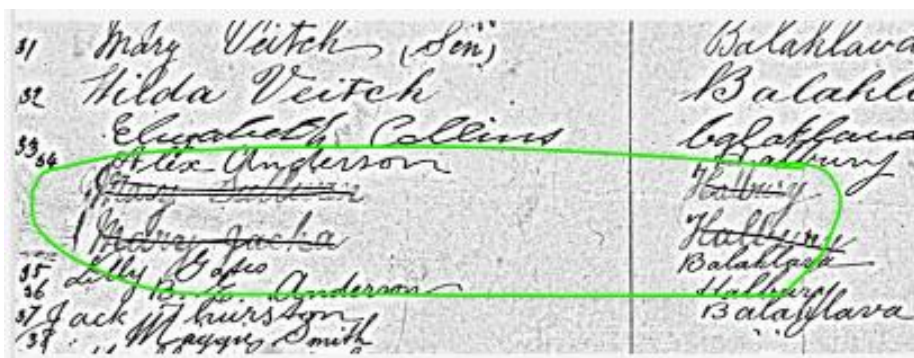
Occupations

Listing an occupation was not a requirement for signing the petition, so occupations were rarely recorded. Only 128 signatures (1.2%) included an occupation, with the most common being farmer (11), Justice of the Peace (10), librarian (8), labourer (6) and storekeeper (5). Other occupations of note include butcher, stone mason, blacksmith, telegraph operator, doctor, nurse, saddler and umbrella maker. Some entries on the SRSA database included occupations not included on the vellum but were included on the database in square brackets. As discussed earlier, these entries were likely added over the years by members of the public who knew this information. Some of these entries include music teacher, bookseller, bootmaker, accountant, postmaster, tailor, confectioner, and Professor of Elocution. While not a comprehensive data set in the scale of the project, these few listed occupations still demonstrate the wide range of signatories and provide a snapshot of the workforce in late colonial South Australia.

Crossed out names

In cases where names were crossed out, we cross-checked these against potential duplicates on other pages. Figure 8 below shows two such examples. Both names are crossed out on scanned page 52, and they possibly appear earlier on scanned page 35. However, even where names were written in full, as is the case for Mary Sullivan below, we could not be certain that this was the exact same person. As such, we kept all crossed out entries in our searchable database, unlike the previous records of the SRSA and COD.

Figure 8: Excerpt of scanned page 52, enhanced

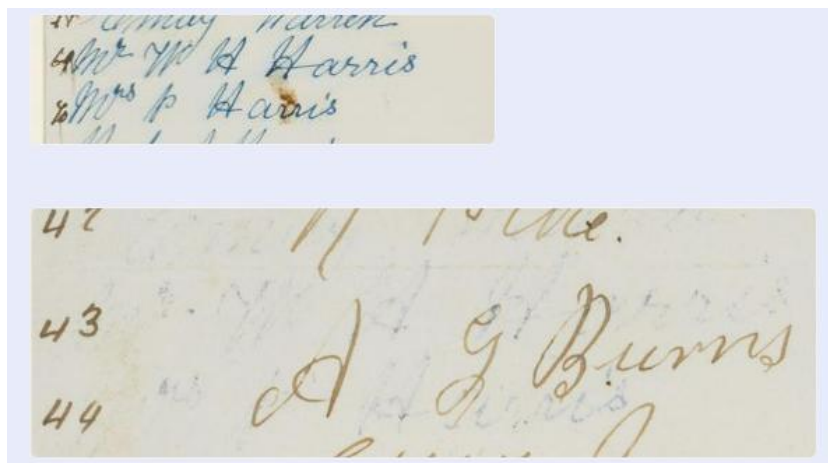


Repeated names

Where it appeared that names were potentially duplicated, a finer look was warranted. In such cases, it was unclear whether repeated names were intentional, an error, simply multiple people with the same name, or where people may have signed the name on behalf of their friend or family member. Figure 9 below shows one example where two names were listed on a page but appeared fainter and in a different colour. After further study of the scanned pages and shared brainstorming, we agreed that the two signatures were an imprint from a different page. The higher resolution scanned pages allowed for this, which may not have been possible for the volunteers

back in 1994. In this case, it was an administrative error, of which we were certain, allowing us to eliminate the duplication and correct the 1994 record.

Figure 9: Excerpt of scanned page 122 and 139, posted in group chat



Different spelling for same place or person name

In flagging names of people and places, it became apparent that there were various spellings for the same place or even surname. This would often appear in a row, for example, as several signatories from the same town. We thought that perhaps, at the time, not everyone knew the spelling of their town (Figure 10) or street (e.g. Right [Wright] Street, Adelaide). To address this issue, in ad hoc cases we kept the original spelling and added our correction in square brackets (Figure 11). However, in other cases where there were several entries that were all very obviously the one name, we agreed to change them all to the contemporary spelling (e.g. changing town name of 'Narracoorte' to 'Naracoorte').

Figure 10: Excerpt of scanned page 67, enhanced and compared to spreadsheet entries, posted in group chat



Figure 11: Excerpt of example above as it appears in the online database

Surname	Honorifics	Given Name	Street	Town	Occupation	Page
MUNDY		Martha		Lesley Creek [Leslie Creek]		67
LUND		Henry		Leslais Creek [Leslie Creek]		67
SAVAGE		Alexr [Alexander]		Leslie Creek		67
SAVAGE		Sarah		Leslie Creek		67

Source: *Women's Suffrage in South Australia*, 2026, Parliament of South Australia, accessed 12 August 2026; <https://suffrage.parliament.sa.gov.au/search-the-petition/>

Signing on behalf of others and underage signatories

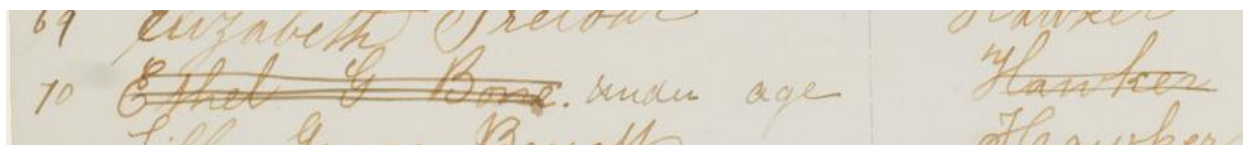
Some signatures are followed by a note reading 'X – his/her mark'. This indicates someone signed on behalf of the signatory, and the signatory made an 'X' next to the writing to indicate their agreement (Figure 12). Similarly, 'per' was used as a proxy for signatories (Figure 13).

Figure 12: Excerpt of scanned page 57

Figure 13: Excerpt of scanned page 164

Also, of note were names that were crossed out with 'under age' written next to them. In 1894, the age of franchise in was 21 and the beginning of the petition stated that the undersigned were adults (as mentioned earlier). One such name was Ethel G. Bone (Figure 14). A search of Genealogy SA and Trove brings up an Ethel Grace Bone, who was born in the cadastral county of Daly in 1878, and resided in Hawker, a town in the Flinders Ranges. If this person is the one who signed the petition, they would have been around 15-16 at the time. Because of the age restriction, this name was not included in our database and was not included in the previous versions from the SRSA and COD.

Figure 14: Excerpt of page 182



Standardised style guide

Throughout the whole transcription process, we recognised that the system we had been working with and the updates we were making may require explanation for anyone using the published searchable database. In doing so, questions emerged about how to balance maintaining as much adherence to the original petition as possible against making entries easier to understand and navigate for members of the public. As such, we developed a style guide to accompany the petition and standardise the entries. For example, as discussed earlier, when writing Junior or Senior, some signatories wrote the abbreviated versions while others wrote out the words in full. For searchability, we would then add either '[Jnr]' or '[Snr]' after any versions that deviated from these abbreviations.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined a journey of transcription undertaken by a small team from the Parliament of South Australia to create a new database of the state's 1894 women's suffrage petition. The digitisation of the petition and the new database offers the public access to an electronic version of the original historical document, with functionality to search by individual or location. Through documenting the joys and challenges of transcribing and re-paginating the petition, this paper highlights the importance of the project as a public engagement achievement for the Parliament of South Australia, and as a feat of digitisation and transcription that has resulted in a quality and interactive resource. It also highlights the original work of the suffrage movement in South Australia and the relevance that holds today as we continue to honour how the past interacts with the present.

This year's ASPG conference theme is "Parliaments when democracy is under challenge." The 1894 women's suffrage petition marked a dramatic shift in what it meant to be democratically represented in South Australia and shows what is possible when the status quo is challenged. Whatever the challenge, democratic gains must be protected, now and for future generations. Civic engagement and publicly available tools, like our new searchable women's suffrage petition, strengthens the relationship between parliament and wider society. The final product is both a celebration of the gains made in 1894, as well as a tool we hope will help maintain this great moment's social relevance.